

On the color green

On a three week expedition ascent of Denali, at 20,320 feet the highest peak in North America, I experienced the psychological toll that weeks above tree line and virtually all vegetation can cause. Three weeks into the climb and after a summit attempt was abandoned as a storm moved in, leading to three days in wind-buffed tents and in the ice caves we constructed on the second day, the will to continue was sapped. It was then that my tent mates decided to approach the expedition leader, Ray Genet, with a proposal to abandon the climb and return to Base Camp and then Takiltna by air. I followed the delegation but remained silent.

When faced with the proposed abandonment, Ray Genet, the founder and head of Alaska Mountain Guides, became enraged. He admonished us for being quitters and stated definitively that there would be no retreat. Another summit attempt followed. I was lead climber on the lead rope. This time we reached the summit.

Climbing expedition style, we had been three full weeks above tree line. It took us only three days to descend to Base Camp on an arm of the Takiltna Glacier at about 8,000 feet. There we were picked up by a one engine supercub airplane piloted by (name), one of the corp of legendary Alaska bush pilots, and flown to Talkeetna, the town from which most Denali climbs were staged.

When I descended the plane and walked into Talkeetna's small downtown, I felt like I was walking on air and I found myself luxuriating in the green vegetation. I realized then that a major part of the debilitation climbers faced on Denali and other expeditions above the vegetation line was the complete absence of the color green. Three weeks of only seeing white snow, black rocks and blue sky had debilitated us psychologically. It was rejuvenating to be back in the green and growing world.

Thus I came to realize the importance of the color green to we humans. Anthropologists have documented that our kind, homo sapiens, evolved in the forests of Africa. It is there that our ancestors came down from the trees and began the walking that would take them into Eurasia and thence to North and South America (possible footnote here on the competing theories).

Humans evolved surrounded by the color green. Most of our species history took place in green places and spaces. I believe that is why we feel best when in spaces and places with lots of green all around us. That is also why techniques like "forest walking" have gained popularity as therapy for psychological and spiritual ills. Green, and especially the green of living things, is uniquely healing for human kind.



Ancient Roman fresco of Flora, or Spring, (2nd century AD)